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ABSTRACT

During a faculty strike at York University (Ontario), two telephone surveys were undertaken to assess student perceptions of the strike. The first survey was taken during the fifth and sixth weeks of the strike, with the objective of documenting the experiences of students while the strike was on. The questionnaire for this survey was developed with the help of input from student focus groups. The second, undertaken 5 months after the strike, measured post-strike experiences and attitudes. Respondents for the first survey included 502 randomly selected full-time undergraduate students in several disciplines; in the second survey 83 percent of the original students were reinterviewed. This report, digested from the complete report, briefly describes the survey's methodology and results, noting the effect the strike had on student schedules, academic achievement, and course completion; its economic impact; and student attitudes towards faculty and staff. It also measured degree of support for the union. The post-strike survey showed effects enduring well beyond the strike period. Although an insignificant number of students left York University because of the strike, a slim majority remained bitter about the conflict; student satisfaction with academic programs remained lower than before the strike. (CH)

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Follow-up Survey of Strike Impact

Institute for Social Research, York University
Centre for Research in Higher Education

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Follow-up Survey of Strike Impact

Institute for Social Research, York University
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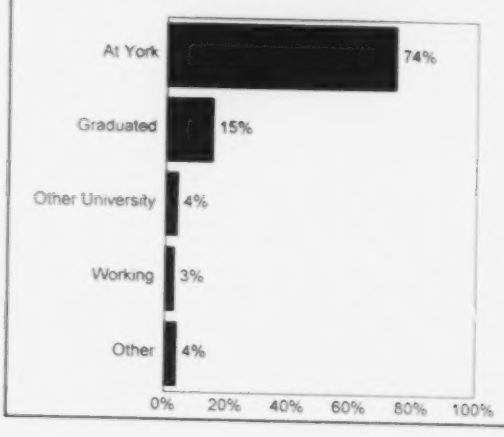
Introduction

From March 20 to May 13 1997 the York University Faculty Association (YUFA) was on strike. As a result, the academic term was extended and the Spring examination period was postponed. Moreover, until the strike was over, many students were unaware of where they stood with regard to work that had not been completed, how they would be required to make up time lost through the strike, and the status of final examinations.

In order to examine the conflict from the students' point of view, the Institute for Social Research (ISR) carried out two telephone surveys that were financed by the Institute's external earnings. The first was conducted in the fifth and sixth weeks of the strike and included 540 randomly selected full-time undergraduate students taking three or more courses in the faculties of Arts, Fine Arts, Environmental Studies, Pure and Applied Science, Education, the Schulich School of Business, and Glendon College. (Only 21 students refused to participate in the study.) A sample of this size is accurate within 4.2 percentage points nineteen times out of twenty.

Graph 1: Whereabouts of Survey 1 Respondents



The objective of the first survey was to document the experiences of students while the strike was on. In order to achieve this objective, it was necessary to meet with students in focus groups to find out what was important from their point of view. Issues raised by students were then incorporated into a questionnaire.

The total number of full-time undergraduate students enrolled in the faculties from which the sample was taken was 19,287. Those not included in the study were enrolled at Atkinson College (the evening part-time operation of York University), Osgoode Law School, and in the Faculty of Graduate Studies. In essence, the survey focussed on typical full-time undergraduate students at York University. A comparison with information from administrative records shows that the sample was representative of the undergraduate student population in terms of gender and faculty of enrolment.

The second survey was carried out with exactly the same students between October 4 and 29, 1997. The objective of this survey was to document the post-strike experiences of York undergraduates to see if the concerns identified in the first survey were realized and how students'

problems were solved by measures put in place by the University after the strike. As a result, as in the first survey, important issues for students were identified through focus group meetings with students at both the Downsview and Glendon campuses of York University. Where appropriate, in this report, excerpts from the focus group meetings have been used to illustrate survey findings.

In total it was possible to re-interview 83% of those who were interviewed in the first survey for a sample size of 446. A sample of this size is accurate within 4.6 percentage points 19 times out of 20.

There were no statistically significant differences in terms of gender, level of study, and faculty of enrolment between the re-interviewed group and those who it was not possible to contact. As a result, it is fair to say that the second sample is representative of the full-time undergraduate population at York.

Summary of First Survey

At a very general level students interviewed during the strike did not feel that an improvement in their education would be one of the outcomes of the dispute.[1] In contrast, they were certain that the conflict had caused considerable academic and economic hardship. Moreover, as far as most students were concerned, neither YUFA nor the administration had the short-term interests of students foremost in mind and the primary concern of the strike was money.

Although for the vast majority the open-ended nature of the strike was the major concern identified in the first survey, it was possible also to identify specific substantial problems created by the cancellation of courses. More specifically, most students were concerned with the possibility that the nature of course requirements would change, that they might forget important materials for exams, that necessary materials would not be covered in some courses, and that because of time lost professors might be less than diligent in their marking practices. Some students feared that because of the strike they would not be able to achieve the marks required to get in, or to stay in, particular programs.

Many students worried that the strike would interfere with their summer school plans. Others were concerned with graduation and the fact that they would not be able to send marks to potential employers. Still others worried about the possibility that grades would not be available to send to other schools to which they had applied.

On the economic front, most students feared that the strike would interfere with their summer jobs and full-time work lined up for after graduation. Indeed, many stated that the conflict had already affected their part-time employment. Moreover, because of the increase in the length of the term, some students spent more money on things like food and accommodation than they had anticipated.

Overall, up to the time of the survey carried out during the strike, the conflict had cost students approximately $1.6 million. This figure did not include losses associated with summer and full-time job delays. Questions on these issues were asked in the post-strike survey.

Only about one third of York students supported the strike. It is worth noting in this connection that the amount of support given to the strike was lower than that given to unions in general.

Despite their lack of support for the strike, a few more students viewed faculty and librarians as being concerned with the impact of the conflict on students than the administration. In general, however, students viewed neither as being concerned with the consequences of the dispute for students.

Throughout the strike it is likely that students would have given failing marks to both YUFA and the administration in terms of communicating to them the main issues of the dispute. Indeed, one is left with the impression that most of students' information on the conflict was second hand and/or based on rumour.

Although students had a major interest in the progress and outcome of the strike, few took steps to affect the outcome. On a commuter campus, this is understandable.

Finally, despite the impact of the strike on students' lives, a small majority still expressed satisfaction with their academic program at York.

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[1]Excerpted from: J. Paul Grayson, *The Strike from the Students' Viewpoint*. Toronto: Institute for Social Research, York University, 1997.

Strike Attrition

For obvious reasons, at the time of the first survey, all participants were students at York. In the post-strike survey, however, as seen in Graph 1, only 74% were still at York. (This figure is comparable to that obtained for all students from administrative records.) Fifteen percent had graduated, 4% were attending another university, 3% were working, and 4% were doing 'other things'.

Among those at another university, 24% had graduated from York and 76% had transferred before getting their bachelor's degree. Of this latter group, only 15% (or less than 1% of the total population not eligible to graduate last year) left York for another university because of the strike. Among students working this year, only 15% (also less than 1% of the student body) stated that their decision to leave York was prompted by the strike. In essence, although it is not possible to comment on the reasons for leaving of those doing 'other things', the strike appeared to have a minimal effect on attrition.

Completing Courses

While the quality of education was a prominent issue during negotiations, during the strike, only 8% of students felt that the quality of education would improve because of the strike; conversely, 17% thought it would get worse. The majority, 65%, believed that things would remain as they were. The remainder did not know. Similar opinions were expressed by students in the post-strike survey. In essence, in the second survey, students saw no change in the quality of their education.

Prior to the strike, students expressed several concerns relating to the completion of courses for the 1996-97 academic year. That this was a realistic concern is shown by the fact that only 26% of students in the post-strike survey indicated that they had no courses that they were required to complete after the strike. Another 20% had from .5 to 1.0 outstanding courses, an additional 26% had 1.5 to 2.0 courses, and the remainder had from 2.5 to 5.0 courses to complete. As a result, it is understandable that in the first survey 87% of students were concerned that the nature of remaining course requirements would change because of the strike.

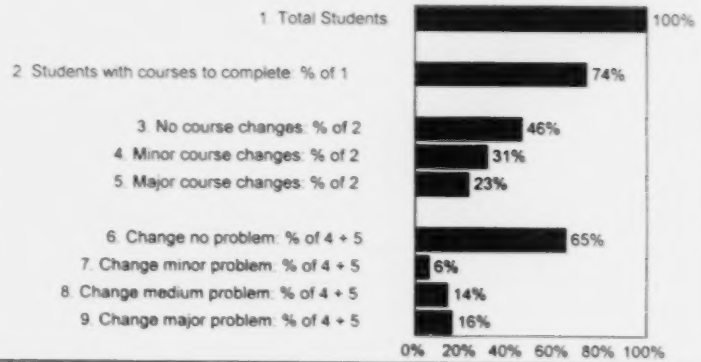
There were supposed to be make-up classes after one of my courses. However, I was not notified of where or when they would be.

I got a letter in the mail two days after my make-up classes had already happened. And it was post-marked, like, the day after the thing had happened! So I missed the make-up classes. I called the department to find out, and even there I got messed-up dates.

In the post-strike survey, one common complaint was that it was difficult for students to find out exactly what was required for the completion of courses. In fact, 50% and 17% respectively stated that they had some or a great deal of difficulty in finding out how they could complete their courses, find out about exam times, and so on.

Once information on course completions was available, as shown in Graph 2, of the 74% of students with courses to complete, 46% reported no changes in requirements, 31% minor changes, and 23% major changes. Of those reporting changes, the majority, 65%, said that the changes caused no problems, 6% minor problems, 14% medium problems, and 16% major problems. Thus, although many students had difficulty in obtaining information on

Graph 2: Students with Course Changes and Problems


1. Total Students
100%
2. Students with courses to complete: % of 1
74%
3. No course changes: % of 2
46%
4. Minor course changes: % of 2
31%
5. Major course changes: % of 2
23%
6. Change no problem: % of 4 + 5
65%
7. Change minor problem: % of 4 + 5
6%
8. Change medium problem: % of 4 + 5
14%
9. Change major problem: % of 4 + 5
16%
0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

how to complete their courses, problems associated with changing requirements to make up for the strike affected relatively few students. Ideally, however, changes should have affected no students.

To a degree, the impact of the strike may have been buffered by 'special accommodations' that students could request so that remaining course requirements did not have an undue impact on their summer jobs and other commitments. Overall, 40% of students said that they asked for one or more special accommodations. Eighty one percent of students reported that they were successful with these requests for special accommodations and another 7% said that they were successful with some of their requests.

Faculty and Staff

Overall, 62% of students said that they were very or somewhat satisfied with the arrangements made by faculty to complete courses after the strike and only 22% expressed dissatisfaction. An equal number expressed the opinion that faculty were either very or somewhat concerned with students' circumstances and that their professors had been very or somewhat helpful to students in terms of the work remaining to be completed. Conversely, only 23% felt that faculty had not been concerned with their circumstances and a minority of 20% believed that faculty had not been helpful to students.

They accommodated us so well because a lot of profs didn't feel that it was fair to put us out, although they did want to fight for their rights.

The ones that were helpful I have more respect for now.

My professor went on vacation, like, two days after the strike.

As long as you made the effort to keep in touch, I think they were very accommodating.

In studies of York undergraduates carried out prior to the strike, approximately 53% stated that if they had problems there was at least one faculty member to whom they could turn for help. In the post-strike survey, however, 65% of respondents gave this answer. This slightly larger number may reflect the assistance some students were given by faculty members in efforts to help them complete their courses after the strike.

When it came to staff, 57% believed that they had been very or somewhat helpful to students in dealing with the aftermath of the strike and only 20% felt that they had been unhelpful. 54% also felt that staff were either very or somewhat concerned with students' circumstances with only 22% saying staff were unconcerned. In essence, a small majority of students believed that after the strike faculty and staff were both helpful and concerned with students' circumstances. Very few believed that either were unhelpful or unconcerned.

Effect on Marks

Because of the strike, at the time of the second survey, 15% of students had yet to receive all of their marks for 1996-97. Among those who had their grades, 26% obtained them by the end of July. A further 56% got theirs in August, and 17% received their marks in September.

Because of delays such as these, for a small minority of students, 2%, marks required for summer job applications had not been available on time. More importantly, marks had not been ready for 68% of students applying to other schools last Spring.

I applied to the Faculty of Ed in Windsor University and all I got was - I was on the waiting list, because my marks didn't go in.

As a result of the strike, 67% of students stated that they forgot material that was important to successful completion of their courses. 71% believed that in some of their courses they did not cover some important material. Likely as a result, 18% of students complained that they were required to do more work in their courses this year to make up the difference.

While 40% of students felt that the strike had no effect on their marks, 40% reported a negative, and 20% a positive effect. In focus groups some students felt that the potential positive effect was a result of a relaxation of standards after the strike; the negative effect resulted from forgetting materials, lack of information about make-up classes, and having to squeeze assignments and exams

between summer work hours.

It seemed like, especially when professors had something to do, it was more, "Okay, what did you get on your other assignments?"

Overall, 33% of students believed that their work was marked less carefully than usual, 7% more carefully, and 53% about the same as usual. 6% had no opinion on this issue.

Economic Costs

On the basis of information collected in the survey during the strike, it was estimated that by the sixth week of the conflict the cost to students in terms of increased expenses because of the extension of the school year was approximately $1.6 million.

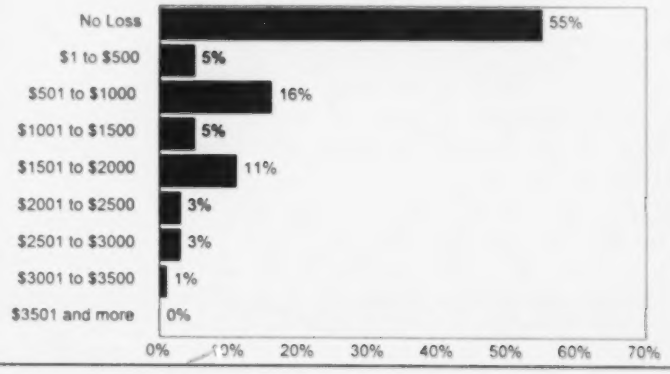
In the post-strike survey, students were asked to estimate the additional costs that resulted from interference of the strike with summer jobs.

Overall, 47% of students indicated that the strike resulted in their spending less time than planned in a summer job. Estimates of loss from this source are summarized in Graph 2.

On the basis of information in the graph, it can be estimated that the total losses for full-time undergraduate York students because of a shorter work summer are approximately $12 million. If the $1.6 million in losses because of the extension of the school year are added to this figure, losses increase to $13.6 million. As part-time, graduate, and Atkinson students were not part of the study, total losses to York students would likely be far higher than this figure.

I needed time to study and I needed the time when I had to actually write the exam. So it was unfair to both the employer and me to start a job and then have to say, "Well, okay, I got this great job, but I need two weeks off."

Graph 3: Cost of Time Lost from Summer Jobs



Other Issues

An issue of considerable importance in both the survey conducted during the strike and in the post-strike survey was summer school. In total, in the latter survey, 46% of students said that they had plans for summer school and of this group 59% stated that the strike led them to change their plans.

Another issue of concern to a minority of students was graduation. Whereas 20% of students stated their intention to graduate last Spring, 74% said that because of the strike they had to cancel their graduation plans.

Union Support

During the dispute, 46% of students said they opposed the YUFA strike, 22% were neutral, and 32% supported it. In retrospect, in the post-strike survey, the strike was opposed by only 39% of students, and the number expressing neutrality and supporting the strike increased to 26% and 36% respectively. In essence, although a plurality in both surveys opposed the strike, there was a small yet statistically significant decrease in the numbers opposing the strike between the two surveys.

I thought it was beyond profs to be part of any union and to really mess people about, and then not try to help them out.

The same is true for support of unions in general. During the strike a plurality, 42%, stated that in general they were supportive of unions. In the post-strike survey this figure increased to 48%. During the strike

27% of students were opposed to unions in general but opposition decreased to only 17% after the strike. Again, these differences are statistically significant.

Although, as seen earlier, only 48% of students currently are supportive of unions, 58% said that they would willingly join a union if the chance arose at a place of work.

While there appears to have been an increase in both support for the YUFA strike and for unions in general between the first and second surveys, 56% of students stated that they felt very or somewhat bitter about the conflict.

I've become so bitter at York. Like, I literally walk in here and I dread it.

Satisfaction

When asked during the strike how satisfied students were with their program at York, only 57% said that they were somewhat or very satisfied. By October of 1997, 63% of exactly the same students stated that they were somewhat or very satisfied. Although small, these differences are statistically significant. Surveys carried out prior to the strike, however, indicate that approximately 74% of students were either somewhat or very satisfied with their programs at York.

Union Backgrounds

Only 23% of students indicated that while they were growing up their mother belonged to a union. The figure for fathers was a sightly higher 35%. While there was no statistically significant relationship between having a mother who belonged to a union and attitudes towards unions in general, students with fathers who were trade union members were more likely than others to be supportive of unions.

Conclusion

The results of the post-strike survey indicate that the conflict created problems for students that endured well beyond the period of the strike.

To begin, a majority of students with courses to complete had difficulty in obtaining information on requirements for completing courses once the strike was over. After courses were completed, many students did not get their marks until late in the summer. This delay was very important to a small minority who needed their grades for summer jobs and for a larger minority who required their grades for applications for other schools or who had hoped to graduate in the Spring of 1997. Many students also complained that the strike upset their plans for summer school.

For some the strike affected how well they did in their courses. Many felt that they forgot information because of the length of the strike. Others believed that because of the dispute they did not cover important materials in their classes. For some this meant spending time in courses that started in the Fall of 1997 learning material that should have been covered the previous year.

Because of these and other consequences of the strike, a large minority of students believed that their marks were lower than they would have been otherwise. Moreover, while the majority believed that there was no change because of the strike, some students felt that marking was less careful than usual. As for the overall effect of the strike on the quality of education, most students believed that there would be no change.

In addition to concern with marks, many students also stated that they had suffered considerable economic losses because of the strike. Overall, the losses that resulted from interference with summer jobs totalled approximately $12 million.

While the magnitude of problems such as the above should not be minimized, a majority of students who had courses to complete experienced either no change in course requirements or felt that changes caused them no problems. Moreover, a majority found faculty and staff helpful in completing courses and in general concerned with students' circumstances. In fact, only a small minority thought that faculty and staff were either unhelpful or unconcerned with students' problems. Likely as a result, slightly larger numbers than usual felt that if they had a problem there was at least one faculty member to whom they could turn for help.

For reasons that are open to interpretation, more students in the post-strike survey than in the survey carried out during the strike were supportive of both the YUFA dispute and unions in general. Despite these slight changes, however, in retrospect, the majority of students still opposed the cessation of work. In addition,

students whose fathers had been union members were more likely to be supportive of unions than students with fathers who were not union members.

Although an insignificant number of students left York because of the strike, a slight majority remained bitter about the conflict. It is not surprising, therefore, that although the overall level of satisfaction with academic programs was higher in the post-strike survey than in the survey carried out during the strike, it has not yet reached pre-strike levels.

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